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Boston gives landlords extra month to comply with new rental property registration law

Posted by Matt Rocheleau August 6, 2013 05:26 PM

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By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

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The city of Boston has given landlords an extra month to register their rental properties under a new system, which – coupled with new inspection rules – is designed to hold landlords more accountable for providing suitable living conditions.

Under a recently-approved ordinance, every private rental unit in Boston was supposed to have been registered by Aug. 1. However, landlords will now have until Aug. 31 after city officials decided to extend the deadline, according to the Boston Inspectional Services Department, which enforces the ordinance.

Since the registration period began on May 1, only about 26,150 units have been registered with the city, said department spokeswoman Lisa Timberlake. That represents less than 20 percent of the estimated 140,000 total units that are required to register.

Landlords who fail to register will be subject to fines and other action from the city, officials said.

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But, the city will likely use discretion in deciding whether to discipline landlords, according to Brian Swett, Boston's Chief of Environment and Energy.

"We'll have to make an assessment as we get closer to Aug. 31," he said. "If there are folks who are willfully not registering their properties that's different from someone who hasn't been informed about this yet by our outreach."

"We did anticipate that this would take some time," added Swett. "To start from zero and get to as close to 140,000 as we can – that's going to take some time. We never thought we'd be at 100 percent right away."

He said that registrations have picked up significantly in recent weeks as word about the new program and its deadlines continues to spread.

"I'm optimistic that we'll have much better numbers at the end of August that we did at the end of July," said Swett. "We're going to stay at it until we get as close to 100 percent as we can."

Late last year, the city adopted a new ordinance requiring for the first time that landlords register their apartments with the city.

Each privately-owned rental unit is required to be registered annually. Landlords must pay the city a \$25 first-time registration fee and \$15 annual renewal fee for each unit.

In each year after 2013, the registration deadline will be July 1. The database will include a list of landlords who become chronic offenders of city housing rules.

The ordinance also contains other new rules, namely about housing inspections, which are scheduled to go into effect at the start of 2014.

While all private rental property must be registered, two property types will be exempt from the new inspection rules – public property and owner-occupied residences with six or fewer units.

All other rental property will be subject to city inspection every five years, though landlords with good track records can seek alternative compliance plans.

Previously, inspections were only required when a unit changed hands. The city relied on landlords to voluntarily report when tenants turnover and then request inspections within 45 days of the turnover.

Less than 10 percent of landlords complied with the old policy. As a result, 98 percent of city housing inspections were conducted in response to complaints.

Swett said that the city has run an aggressive campaign to try to notify landlords about the new ordinance.

Postcards and letters have been mailed to property owners and management companies; city officials have engaged with leaders of property owner associations; billboards and posters around the city remind landlords to register; advertisements have also run in community newspapers and in the city's Inspectional Services Department newsletter; officials have talked about the new rules on local TV stations; and the city has hosted presentations and seminars.

"We are trying to carpet the landlord community with information about this," said Swett. "Sometimes folks see those notices the first time, they think 'oh that doesn't apply to me.' So we have to keep putting the information out there. We have to catch their attention on it."

He said the city will host an education seminar for landlords at 6 p.m. on Thursday, Aug. 15 at the Inspectional Services Department offices on the 5th floor of 1010 Massachusetts Ave.

Staff there will also hold special Saturday office hours on Aug. 17 and 24 from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.

On every Wednesday and Thursday in August from 9:30 a.m. to 1 p.m., extra staffing will be available at City Hall. And, Boston's new [City Hall To Go](#) truck will also be visiting each neighborhood this month to provide services, including landlord registration.

"We're trying to provide more avenues for people to register their rental units," Swett said.

Property owners can register rental units online at www.cityofboston.gov/icd/housing by picking up a paper application from the

www.cityofboston.gov/isd/housing, by picking up a paper application from the Inspectional Services Department's offices on the 5th floor of 1010 Massachusetts Ave., or by requesting a mailed application by calling 617-635-1010.

For more information on the new ordinance, [click here](#).

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